

Promising Practice in Action: *Use of an Onsite Academic/Literacy Specialist*

Northern Penobscot Technical Center¹
Region 3
Lincoln, ME
Al Dickey, Director

- **Location:** Region 3's CTE center is in four physical locations throughout the region, with the main facility in Lincoln
- **Student population:** 250 (125 at Lincoln)
- **Sending schools/districts:** 5
 - ▶ **Program focus:** Use of the position of an onsite academic/literacy specialist to provide support to students and teachers.

Al Dickey faced major challenges—students who liked their CTE classes but were unmotivated academically; the reality of a changing and more demanding 21st century workplace; teachers who were unsure about how to do academic or literacy integration; and four locations in which to get it all done. Sending schools were uncertain why the CTE director was suddenly talking about literacy and academic rigor, insisting that they needed to work more closely together to support student success, and providing CTE teachers with literacy teacher professional development. Dickey responded to the challenge of changing expectations by adding a new staff position “to help move things in the right direction.”

At the beginning of the 2005–06 school year, Dickey hired Bethany Hatt to work 60% time as a team teacher in four CTE program areas: automotive, health occupations, building trades, and culinary arts. The other 40% of Hatt's time is spent supporting students through use of the PLATO learning system.

Supporting Students

Hatt set up a PLATO lab with four computers at the Lincoln CTE facility. The program is web-based so students can access it from their sending schools. Eight students came to the lab for one-half to one hour daily during the 2005–06 school year. Hatt said she was pleased with the progress students made and liked the way they could learn in a self-paced environment while she provided “just in time” instruction. She hopes to expand the program next year to serve more students.

Supporting Teachers

Hatt attended several professional development sessions offered throughout the state to increase her own knowledge about literacy. She worked on developing relationships with teachers and looked at ways that reading, writing, and math could be integrated into each of the four program areas. The teachers who worked with Hatt met monthly as a group to discuss what they were doing in the classroom and to support one another. Hatt also went into classes on a regular schedule on a once/week basis. She was able to facilitate a variety of English and math activities connected to what was being worked on in each program area. Sometimes she taught

¹ This mini case study is based on information gathered through multiple meetings with Region 3 CTE staff, document review, and data collected during an onsite visit in May 2006.

lessons, sometimes she co-taught with the instructor. Both Hatt and the teachers noted the importance of having time to plan together.

What Teachers Said

All of the teachers with whom Hatt worked voiced the importance of academic rigor and literacy integration. Teachers noted they were doing some work with reading, writing, math, and critical thinking prior to the 2005–06 school year, but they all described new things they did in 2005–06 because of the encouragement and the support. These teachers also said several other teachers asked about what they were doing and seemed to be trying out some of the literacy support strategies in other program areas. Finally, the participating teachers noted that they need to do academic integration and literacy development “more like once a week instead of two or three times per quarter.”

The four teachers voiced concern that they need to learn to differentiate the use of the strategies in the classroom the way they already do in the shop. Teachers voiced a frustration at the wide range of abilities students brought, especially the lack of critical thinking skills, and they said the literacy strategies are helpful. In the 2006–07 school year, the teachers want to focus on a few common strategies that will really help them support students’ skills in ways that are applicable to the CTE program areas. The teachers also want more strategies they can use.

The participating teachers said they found students much more open to “doing the reading and math” when it was in the CTE environment. “The content area is something that interests them and they’ll say ‘okay, I’ll give it a shot, let’s see’ and that’s the door opening a crack.” Teachers noted that the relationships they have with students gave them credibility. The consensus is that if the CTE teachers told the students they needed to do this, they will “go with it.” For example, in the automotive program the students did an oral presentation based on an inquiry topic of their choice. “I’ve never done an oral presentation but it actually came out quite well...you know, if you as a teacher promote the need, encourage, show some support...the kids believe in what we say. They trust us, they know we as teachers don’t like spinning their wheels.” However, teachers stressed the need to establish expectations up front with sending schools so students will know that they need to read, write, and present as part of their CTE program.

The teachers who worked with Hatt in the 2005–06 school year acknowledged the need for literacy development. They saw the need for themselves—and the students—to have a “toolbox” of strategies. Knowing how to read, write, and think—in the words of one teacher, is “what separates the shingle haulers from the ones running the job.”

Additional Staff Professional Development

Dickey encouraged staff to take advantage of the CTE mentor program and two of his teachers participated, developing applications of the literacy strategies for their program areas and increasing their capacity to develop literacy skills in the CTE classroom. All staff participated in three on-site two-hour workshops, with literacy consultant Tanya Baker, focused on literacy strategies for teaching vocabulary and scaffolding the reading process. This provided staff with concrete strategies they could begin to use.

Use of Data

Accuplacer data was used to determine which students should work with Hatt using the PLATO system. The director will investigate ways to get a lexile score for each student and to track both student and program progress.

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Evidence in the Classroom

Despite the adjustment to a new schedule, beginning after the school year started, and facing technology challenges, there was evidence that students were helped directly in the PLATO lab and that instruction was more rigorous and incorporated more literacy in the four program areas where Hatt focused her efforts. Examples included:

- *Automotive*: Students received training in service writing and writing repair orders; oral presentations/demonstrations on a topic of interest; discussion of articles; measurement; and problem solving.
- *Health Occupations*: Students had repeated opportunities to do essay writing; reaction papers; chart reading; summarizing; and reading strategies (KWL).
- *Building Trades*: Students completed textbook survey; learned applications for fractions; and practiced reading strategies (Anticipation/reaction guide, word sort) and reading for information.
- *Culinary Arts*: Students focused on the following: research and inquiry; reading for information; writing; text structures (elements of a restaurant review, formal essay, menus); reading strategies (word sort).

One of the biggest shifts may be as yet invisible. The teachers who worked with Hatt said they were focused on where they needed to help students reach in terms of reading, writing, and math as it pertains to each program area. Teachers were more aware of what students needed—and lacked—in terms of their academic literacy skills. More teachers asked Hatt for assistance. At the end of the year, students began to ask Hatt if they could work with her to get extra help using the PLATO system. Hatt is researching getting more licenses for next year.

Next Steps

- Summarize plans for next year and publicize them to staff and sending schools.
- Publicly discuss the importance of academic integration and literacy development with students, parents, CTE staff, and sending schools verbally and in writing. Clarify the types of literacy skills that students will work on while at the CTE center.
- Continue supporting the current teacher team and find ways to work with additional teachers.
- Establish an expectation that teachers will be using literacy strategies or academic integration with 50% of their classroom instruction.
- Discuss the need for data on student reading and math abilities with the sending schools.
- Provide additional professional development to teachers.
- Develop a common toolkit of literacy strategies with examples that all teachers can use.
- Develop a plan for monitoring student progress and program progress.
- Investigate ways technology can assist with distance issues, both to serve students and to support teachers.
- Maintain a list of successful academic integration and literacy development activities and disseminate to staff.
- Increase the variety and amount of reading students do in each program area and suggest ways teachers can incorporate literacy strategies into reading assignments.
- Review the schedule to ensure students are not missing out on academic rigor/literacy development.

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For more information, contact Al Dickey, Director, or Bethany Hatt, Academic/Literacy Specialist.

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